Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages | Commissariat aux langues officielles

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Toward better governance in the development of official language minority communities in Canada

This morning, as part of the symposium of the National Program for the Integration of both Official Languages in the Administration of Justice (POLAJ) at the University of Ottawa, the Commissioner of Official Languages, Dr. Dyane Adam, presented a new study that takes a first look at the effectiveness of the governance of official language minority communities.

Prepared for the Office of the Commissioner by Linda Cardinal and Marie-Ève Hudon of the University of Ottawa, the study provides a preliminary analysis of the Canada-community agreements from the point of view of governance. These agreements are concluded between the federal government (Department of Canadian Heritage) and the official language minorities of each province and territory. They represent a first attempt at coordination and horizontal management by government and non-government stakeholders. The purpose of the agreements is to ensure funding to support the long-term development of minority communities.

The study shows that the Canada-community agreements have provided for initial coordination among groups and a renewal of relations between minority communities and the federal government. The agreements also provide some financial stability for minority community organizations, and the participation of the communities in the decision-making process allows them to take more responsibility for their development. The authors note however that the agreements are not a very effective method of governance. They have resulted in tensions within the networks of players, the weakening of the community power of official language minorities and significant bureaucratization of relations between the communities and the federal government.

The implementation of the agreements poses a challenge to both the government and to official language minorities. From their analysis of the difficulties encountered in managing the agreements, the authors drew the following observations or lessons on how to foster better governance:

- The communities must have collective accountability mechanisms that are acceptable to all.
- The division of responsibilities and the roles of government and non-government stakeholders must be clearly established in the agreements.
- The rules of the game must be clearly defined from the outset.
- Funding criteria, as well as performance and results criteria must be clearly established.
- There must be a mechanism for settling disputes between the government and the community or between community stakeholders.
- Agreements must be negotiated in keeping with an overall vision for long-term community vitality and development.

Lastly, the study recommends that the government adopt a more effective mechanism for interdepartmental co-operation in order to encourage more federal agencies to participate in community

development under the agreements. The federal government could also involve provincial and municipal governments in the process so as to ensure for the development of complementary initiatives with regard to official languages.

"This study is only a preliminary analysis of the issue of horizontal governance as regards official languages, but I hope that it will provide food for thought for the communities and the federal government alike. The Canada-community agreements benefit official language minority communities if they strengthen their development plans and enable them to clarify their expectations of the government and vice versa. We must take the time to ascertain whether current practices are the most suitable, considering the development needs of official language minority communities," said Dr. Adam.

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